



Counter Surfing and Garbage Raiding

Dogs are naturally curious and love to get into everything. Dogs also love food, especially the food they see us eat. So it's not surprising that pet parents often have problems keeping dogs from "counter surfing" and raiding the trash. Unfortunately, once your dog has learned there's tasty stuff to be found on kitchen counters, in cupboards and buried in garbage cans, he's more likely to look for food in those places again. Even small dogs aren't exempt from food stealing—there are reports of especially clever terriers learning to push chairs up to counters so that they can conquer new heights!

What to do? Prevention is the key!

The best way to ensure that your dog never gets in the habit of stealing food is to prevent him from experiencing the joys of thieving. Always put leftover foods away. Keep countertop foods in containers. Put pastries and breads in a bread bin and cookies in a jar. Fruits and raw vegetables are less appealing to many dogs, but it's still worth keeping them in or on top of the refrigerator. Use trash cans with lids that dogs can't open, or keep the can in a closed cupboard. Place wastebaskets up high so that your dog can't reach them. If your dog has learned to open cupboard doors, install child-proof latches. Close doors or use baby gates to keep your dog out of certain areas. If you're consistent about keeping foods inaccessible when your dog is a puppy or is new to your home, you can probably relax these restrictions later on.

Perpetually hungry dogs who ransack kitchen countertops and garbage cans for food might be easier to discourage if they have more to eat. Feed your dog several small meals a day. If your dog is on a diet, speak with your veterinarian about a high-fiber, low-calorie diet that will help your dog feel full.

Providing plenty of physical and mental exercise can also help keep your dog off the counters and out of the trash. Some dogs get into trouble purely out of boredom. If your dog is well exercised and has plenty of chew toys to keep him occupied, he'll be less likely to get into things he shouldn't.



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Teaching Your Dog to Stay off Counters and Out of the Trash

The first step in teaching your dog that it's unacceptable for him to get into these areas is to always react immediately when you see him jump on counters, nose around cupboard doors or nudge at the trash can. Clap your hands loudly and say "Off!" in a firm tone of voice. Then take your dog by the collar and remove him from the area. Do not do this if you suspect your dog might bite you when you grab him by the collar. Instead, please seek professional help immediately.

Some dogs learn that it's only safe to surf the counters and get into the trash if people aren't around. If this describes your dog, you can dissuade him from getting into off-limit areas by using "environmental punishers." Environmental punishers work by punishing your dog directly, without you present. For instance, if your dog jumps from the floor onto the kitchen counter, you can balance some lightweight cookie sheets on the edge of the counter. When he jumps up, he'll land on the sheets. They'll move and possibly topple over while your startled dog leaps back onto the floor. He shouldn't be harmed by this experience, but it's unlikely he'll risk jumping onto the counter again.

If your dog doesn't jump up onto the counter but instead reaches for things by placing his front feet on the counter, you can design a "pop-can pyramid." Gather a dozen or so empty soda cans. Tie a light string to one, and position the can a few inches back from the edge of the counter or on a shelf above the counter. Build a pyramid with the cans, placing the can with the string on the bottom of the structure. Tie the other end of the string to a small piece of food that you know your dog likes. Place the food near the edge of the counter. Leave the kitchen and give your dog a chance to discover the enticing tidbit. If all goes as planned, he'll snatch the piece of food, pulling the can from the bottom of the pyramid, and all the cans will come crashing down. If they hit your dog, the empty cans won't harm him. Even if they don't hit him, the falling cans will make a terrible racket and startle or scare your dog. You can also use the pop-can pyramid to teach him to stay out of the garbage can.

Commercially available deterrent devices perform a similar function. The Snappy™ Trainer is a large plastic paddle affixed to an upside-down mousetrap. Any touch causes the mousetrap to trigger. When triggered, the large paddle propels the device into the air, makes a loud snapping noise and startles the dog who touched it. The Snappy Trainer is safe to use because the trap is upside down, so no part of your dog's body can be caught in it. Snappy Trainers are most effective if you set up two or three and place a sheet of newspaper on top of them. When your dog touches the newspaper, it triggers the traps simultaneously. Snappy Trainers are good for use on countertops and tables and inside cupboards and trash cans.

Another deterrent, called SSSCAT™, is a motion-activated system that triggers a blast of compressed air when a dog comes within a certain distance of it. You can position the SSSCAT in areas where you don't want your dog to go, such as the corner where you keep the trash can or on the kitchen counter. Another possibility is to cover the surface of the countertop or the floor next to the trash can with a ScatMat®, a sheet of plastic that delivers a mild static charge when a dog steps on it. Because they're not as startling to dogs as the Snappy Trainer, the Scccat and ScatMat may need to be left in place for a long period of time to work. The pop-can pyramid and the Snappy Trainer usually teach dogs to stay away after just one or two experiences.



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The advantage to using an environmental punisher is that the scary thing happens whether you're present or not. Your dog won't learn to simply wait until it's safe (until you're not around) to do things like jump up onto counters and dive into trash cans. Instead, he'll discover that it's never safe to do those things. Plus, since you won't always be there when your dog gets punished, your dog won't associate an environmental punisher with you. You don't want him to decide that you're the scary thing!

What NOT to Do

- Do not scold or punish your dog if you discover that he's already eaten stolen food. Unless you actually catch your dog in the act of stealing the food, it's pointless to punish him. He won't understand what you're punishing him for. More likely, he'll learn to be frightened of you.
- Do not shoo or push your dog off of countertops and tables. He could fall and injure himself. Always pick him up and put him on the floor, or tell him to get off and let him jump down himself.
- Do not use any device to scare your dog away from forbidden areas if there's a chance he could be physically harmed by the device. For instance, do not substitute real mouse traps for the Snappy Trainer. The goal of an environmental punisher is to make your dog reluctant to return to a particular place by startling him or making the place uncomfortable for him. Physically hurting your dog is neither necessary nor effective.
- Do not resort to a muzzle to control your dog's thieving behavior. Muzzles restrict a dog's breathing and prevent him from drinking water, so only use them for short periods of time when you can closely supervise your dog.
- Do not use environmental punishers to keep your dog away from a certain area if he's especially skittish and nervous. He could become so frightened that he'll be reluctant to enter the room at all or even move around your home.

For AAWL adopters who need more information or if you have additional questions, please call our Behavior Helpline at 602-273-6852 ext. 124.